

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 146

EA 008 478

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TITLE The Organization of Catholic Secondary Schools: A Preliminary Statement on Catholic School Governance.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (60th, Washington, D.C., March 30-April 3, 1975)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Catholic High Schools; *Centralization; Consolidated Schools; Educational Finance; Enrollment Trends; *Governance; Parent Attitudes; School Closing; School District Autonomy; *School Environment; *School Organization; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS Declining Enrollments

ABSTRACT

This paper explores whether or not an effort to centralize the administration of several metropolitan Catholic high schools for the purpose of economy of resources would produce an unanticipated consequence that would severely offset any savings. The research suggests that Catholic parents perceive a difference among these schools in terms of their educational and social environments and make choices accordingly. If the centralization decreases the differences among these schools, will Catholic parents continue to select one or another of these schools for their children? The answer has a direct bearing on the financial crisis facing Catholic schools in the nation. (Author)

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THE ORGANIZATION OF CATHOLIC
SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A PRELIMINARY
STATEMENT ON CATHOLIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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A paper presented at the 1975 Annual
Meeting of the American Educational
Research Association in Washington, D.C.

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ABSTRACT

The Organization of Catholic Secondary Schools: A Preliminary Statement on Catholic School Governance

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The purpose of this paper is to explore whether or not an effort to centralize the administration of several metropolitan Catholic high schools for the purpose of economy of resources would produce an unanticipated consequence that would severely offset any savings. The research suggests that Catholic parents perceive a difference among these schools in terms of their educational and social environments and make choices accordingly. If the centralization decreases the differences among these schools, will Catholic parents continue to select one or another of these schools for their children? The answer has a direct bearing on the financial crisis facing Catholic schools in the nation.

The Organization of Catholic Secondary
Schools: A Preliminary Statement
on Catholic School Governance

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Introduction

During the period of the 50's and early 60's, Roman Catholic parochial schools experienced a rapid expansion in terms of enrollment. This occasioned heavy investments of financial resources. Since the middle 60's, however, parochial school enrollments have leveled out or declined, depending on the area of the country. This occurrence has come in the face of rapidly rising costs. Given these two factors, the responses from Catholic school supporters have ranged from increased demand for public financial assistance to the closing and/or consolidation of many elementary and secondary schools. In an effort to maintain or in some cases salvage parochial school education, some dioceses have, among other things, attempted to centralize the control of the schools within its jurisdiction in the name of greater efficiency. Though there may be variations on the theme, essentially, the model followed was that of public education. That is, a decrease in the autonomy of the individual school and those who governed it and an increase in control in the hands of the diocesan bishop or his appointed superintendent. This loss of "local" control (be it in the hands of the parish priest or a religious order or a parish or school council of layman) and the centralization of administrative functions, especially in

the employment of teachers and principals while appearing to induce greater efficiency, may actually be counter-productive in terms of parental support. Given that the basic source of funds for the support of parochial schools comes from the parents of children attending those schools, the loss of parental support in significant numbers will prove a disaster to those who wish to maintain such schools.

This paper deals with two issues related to the organization of Catholic schools, (1) differences among Catholic schools and (2) local control. These two issues are interrelated. What is being dealt with is the perceptions of parents (in a larger sense, citizens) and the potential impact of these perceptions of the continued support for such schools.¹

Differences Among Schools

While a staff member of an educational research bureau located on a campus of a state university, this writer became deeply involved in a study commissioned by the office of education of the Catholic diocese covering the region in which the university was located. The intent of the study was to suggest ways in which to implement recommendations from a previous study to centralize the control over the various parochial schools in the diocese. The basic

¹ The inferences and conclusions in this paper are based on data collected in a Roman Catholic diocese located in the northwestern section of the United States. The bibliography (annotated) cites, among other listings, those sources.

problem, however, was the fact that some of the Catholic high schools in the diocese were owned and controlled by religious orders not directly under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop.

As a part of looking at the question of "how to centralize," the study team decided to see if there were differences among the several high schools. As the study was completed, several things suggested that differences did exist among the high schools insofar as the students and parents were concerned. It appeared that the decision as to which high school to attend was partially influenced by these perceived differences.

There were certain obvious differences. For example, one of the high schools was coeducational, the others were not. Two of the schools had a reputation as being highly academically oriented, another placed emphasis on athletics (an all male school) and two others (one very old---one quite new) had reputations as being places to send children if one "had arrived socially" as one priest phrased it. There was some variation in tuition, but not as extensive as we had thought. There was a wide variation in student population among the schools from slightly over 200 students in the smallest to almost 700 in the largest. None of the physical facilities were crowded. Two members of the study team constructed survey instruments to capture the parents', teachers' and students' views of the normative climate of

each school. These instruments sought perceptions pertaining to the "atmosphere" of each of the schools. Four norms were investigated (mass attendance, emphasis on studying, dating and obedience to teachers). In addition, the opinions of the parents and students were obtained on how well the schools did in certain basic activities (building moral character, citizenship, providing training in academic subjects, preparing the students to earn a living and providing a situation for students to develop close friendships).²

The results of the analysis of the data indicated two things of significance related to the matter at hand.

First, after examining the normative climate data for each school it was noted that there were discernible differences among the seven groups of parents as well as among the seven groups of students. Essentially the differences ranged on a continuum from traditional to progressive in terms of acceptable behavior on the norms examined. Second, the opinion of the parents on how well the schools performed on basic activities was consistently higher than the students. Coupled with these points was the finding that the students of five of the seven high schools were more concerned with the judgment of their parents about the norms sampled than with their peers or teachers.

²Random samples from each school were taken by family unit. Questionnaires were given to the students at school thereby securing nearly 100% return. The parent's questionnaires were mailed and the return was slightly under 60%.

In addition the research team examined the samples drawn for each high school in terms of distance traveled from home to school. By using zip code locations, a somewhat hazardous procedure, it was found that significant numbers of students traveled long distances at family expense to attend their particular school when at least one other high school was located closer to home. This was true of both sexes, given that two schools catered to all male and four catered to all female. When the one high school that was coeducational was examined, it was found that nearly 25% of the students, at parent's expense, rode school buses from the far northside of this large metropolitan area to a southern suburb to attend school. All of the schools "attendance areas" were far larger geographically than any of the public high school areas in the same city.

Taking these factors together with the degree of autonomy each of the high schools had, the research team urged very cautious implementation of centralized control and standardization of these schools. Though there was nothing in the data collected that would determine how important this matter of a "distinctive atmosphere" in each of the schools was in terms of selection (by parent and/or student), the literature reviewed for the study did suggest it was important, especially in the face of rising costs. Also the literature strongly indicated that, as perceived

differences between Catholic schools and public schools diminished in the minds of Catholic parents, support of Catholic schools decreased.

Two studies conducted by colleagues of this writer, at about the same time in another city in the same general geographic area, strongly indicated that public school parents discerned noticeable differences in the "atmosphere" among the four public high schools in the city. There was also strong support for interschool transfer of students among those parents so that students might attend a school with a suitable "atmosphere."

Local Control

A final study (unpublished) deserves mention.

This writer, while investigating the closure of Roman Catholic high school in a small rural town located in the same diocese discovered that though the stated reason given by those making the decision was rising cost (declining enrollment---higher salaries for personnel, especially the demand for a double increase in salary for members of the religious order teaching in the school), this factor may well have been only the precipitating cause. Some six years before, the ownership and control of the school passed from the hands of a religious order whose abby was located just outside of town to control by the Bishop's office some fifty miles distance. One adult informant summed up the perceptions

of many by suggesting that the abby being staffed by "three generations of local sons" understood the community. The impression conveyed by most was that the community had lost control.

After the change in control, the two principals and several of the teachers came from outside the community and were "sent down" by the Bishop. Given that this small rural community was highly homogenous (90% Roman Catholic and of essentially Germanic origin, which the local telephone book and weekly newspaper archives confirmed), this writer developed the notion that there might be more to the closing than stated. After interviewing a number of the local influentials (religious and lay), some of whom were most familiar with the history of the community, there was a strong indication that along with rising costs, the community had become disenchanted with the loss of local control. This feeling of loss of control was aided by the assumption that the Irish Bishop "up north" did not understand the needs of this small community.

It is interesting to note that within one academic year after this school's closure, the community lay leaders were successful in reopening the high school as a public school and bringing back the town's children from the regional public high school to which local tax money had always been paid for support. To be sure, "mixed" in these events was

a determination by local leaders that they did not want this small rural town to go the way of many other communities when their high schools were consolidated. The lay leaders that were interviewed feared that the community would gradually die. Their Catholic school (now public) was, in their minds, the focal point of the community along with the local parish. Most of them expressed concern about sending their children a few miles to the regional public high school. As one phrased it ---"after all, most of the kids there are Protestant."

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, it must tentatively be suggested that Catholic schools face a problem of loss of parental support when the hierarchy of a diocese attempts to centralize (de-localize) its schools. This conclusion needs to be conditioned on the basis of the geographic area of the country, the area's history and traditions, and the ethnic and socioeconomic mix of its Catholic population. Consolidation and centralization of control may increase the rate of loss of parental support. This potential consequence should be considered before extensive reorganization is undertaken.

Bibliography
(Annotated)

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- Erickson, Kenneth A., and others. A Study of Catholic Secondary Education: Metropolitan Area of Portland, Oregon. Eugene, Oregon: Bureau of Educational Research, University of Oregon, 1971. Chapters II-V, pp. 7-95 and the several instruments found in the appendixes, pp. 161-213. These chapters and related instruments were conceived and written by three members of the research team: John R. Hurnard, Gregory P. Maltby and John D. Nicks. Chapter II is entitled: "Student and Parent Opinions of Portland Area Catholic High Schools"; Chapter III: "Normative Climate in Portland Area Catholic High Schools"; Chapter IV: "A Case Study of an Urban Parish: Parishioners' Opinions of Catholic Secondary Education" (one of the purposes of this case study was to obtain opinions on alternatives for funding Catholic schools); Chapter V: "A Review of the Empirical Findings". The literature review in these chapters particularly Chapter V may be of interest to the reader. Since certain recommendations were edited out of these chapters by the Director of the Bureau, a copy of the deleted parts can be obtained from the author of this paper.
- Lannie, Vincent P. (ed). "The Future of Catholic Education in America," (General title). Notre Dame Journal of Education, II (Spring, 1971). The entire issue of this journal was given over to the above mentioned topic. Though some of the specific articles are mentioned in Bureau study (see Erickson entry--this bibliography) they deserve mention here. See: Thomas J. Riley, "Editorial: What System?" pp. 4, back cover; Ernest Bartell. "Economic Analysis of Non-Public Education" pp. 54-60; Francesco Cordaseo. "The Catholic Urban Schools: Patterns of Survival," pp. 61-67; and Frank J. Fahey. "Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of St. Louis: A Case Study," pp. 68-75.
- Maltby, Gregory P. "The Death of a Catholic High School: A Case Study" (title tentative), in process. This is the study mentioned under the heading of Local Control in the paper.

Seidl, Anthony E., and others. Study of Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon. Washington, D.C.: Academy For Educational Development, Inc., 1969. This was the original study mentioned in the paper that among other things recommended the centralization of various educational functions within the diocese.

Sonnenfeld, David. Family Choice in Schooling: A Case Study-- Intradistrict Student Transfers, Eugene, Oregon. Eugene, Oregon: Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, University of Oregon, 1972. This is one of the two public school studies mentioned in the paper.

In addition to the above entries a complete ERIC search was made under the general category of Catholic. Only two entries appeared useful. Upon examination both entries proved unproductive to the topic. Time span of the search was 1972-1975.